

3rd March 2024 – Lent 3 – Pathways of Prayer – Ephesians 3:14-21 ‘The devotional path’

Here’s a question to kick off with – what sort of things do you pray about? If there was an angel in the research department in heaven, whose job it was to categorise the various types of prayers that you pray, what would this week’s output look like for you? I remember reading an article a few years ago about this subject, which had this harsh headline: ‘What do Americans pray about? Themselves.’ If we’re honest, I suspect it’s not just Americans who are prone to do this – it probably describes most of us as well.

Today we continue our Lent series ‘Pathways of prayer’, looking at one of the most famous prayers in the whole bible – the prayer St Paul prays for the little church in Ephesus. This is a church that was close to his heart, he’d planted this church himself and then returned for three years, probably his longest stay anywhere during his mission trips. If Paul was going to pray for personal needs for any church, it would be this one, full of his friends – but the content is radically different from what we might expect, if we were writing this prayer. As with most of his prayers, he prays for much bigger things – for the work of Christ, for our growth and maturing in the Lord, for God’s glory – and of all the prayers in his letters, this is perhaps the greatest of them all.

Or to quote Bishop Handley Moule: ‘Who has not read and re-read the closing verses of the third chapter of Ephesians with the feeling of one permitted to look through parted curtains into the Holiest Place of the Christian life?’ It’s that kind of prayer isn’t it, like your first view of a world-famous building, or mountain peak, or a glorious sunset – and all you can say is ‘wow’! But let’s try and get a peek through the curtains today....

There’s so much we could say about this short prayer, but **let’s start where the prayer starts: with the glorious riches of the Father**. This is the start point, not just of prayer, but of the whole spiritual life. Life is a gift, and God has made us to relate to him as a loving parent. Even if you’ve not had a good experience of human parents, or they’ve long since passed away, God is the parent you always wished you had. And this divine parent has glorious riches to give away as his inheritance to his children.

So many of us are raised with the idea that God is a miser – a finger-wagging judge who only gives us things grudgingly. There may be reasons for that: we may feel we’ve been dealt a bad hand in life, or seen prayers that we desperately wanted to be answered in our favour which weren’t, or perhaps God said ‘no’. And it shakes our confidence, so we only ask God for small things after that. Maybe we don’t ask at all.

What this prayer does is totally re-orientate our priorities. I believe what the Lord wants to say to many of us today – me included – is this: *‘I love it when you pray, but if only you were as concerned about what I want, as what you want.’* You see, what’s so radical about this prayer is that although it is about our wellbeing, it sees that wellbeing entirely from God’s perspective. Don’t get me wrong, here: *of course* we can pray about our immediate needs and desires – but the risk for all of us in our me-centred Western culture is that we only pray about our immediate needs and desires; we ignore all the things the bible says we should be praying about first – God’s priorities – before we get on to ours. ‘Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done,’ we pray every time we say the Lord’s Prayer – and then the content of our prayers is often so different!

So, where does Paul ask for God’s glorious riches to be poured out? In the form of spiritual power – the word power occurs three times here, and each is directed towards a different spiritual outcome – and again, let’s note that, **in order to grow in the spiritual life, we need God to enable the growth.**

Our effort is important, spiritual growth is not just something that is done to us, like a patient on an operating table, but it does need God to make things grow. We can sow and water, but God makes our spiritual lives grow. This is what the Father's glorious riches are for, and his power brings about three amazing outcomes: first in faith, second in love, and third in action.

So, firstly, Paul prays for God's glorious riches to be poured out in power so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. There is a wonderful mystery here: the Lord is not just with us, the Lord is *in* us, through faith. We are not just being religious or following rules or even joining a new community – we are new creations, and our lives are forever joined with Christ. He isn't just watching over us, *He dwells in us*. It is unique among world religions – the one and only God, dwelling with us in the most intimate way. The devotional path of prayer we're looking at this week starts from this extraordinary viewpoint: Christ dwells in us, he's right *here*, in our hearts.

And we constantly need the power of Christ to remind us of it. We're always tempted to go off on our own, to wander away. But the good news is that, if we are followers of Jesus, we never really do, because Christ is already with us. When we stop, he's there. When we turn around, he's there. When we return, he's there, because he never really went away. There is nowhere we can go now without Christ. He dwells, he abides, in us. If you've never really thought about that before, or just forgotten it, let that sink in again. There is nowhere you can go without Christ.

Second, Paul prays for power for us to grasp the great love of Christ – the only thing that exists in four dimensions: wide, long, high and deep. It is something not just to grasp but to *experience* – that is the meaning here of the word 'know': it is the experience of a child who knows at a deep level the unconditional love of a parent, and who is wrapped in that identity. So much of our world tells us love needs to be earned. For a Christian, it is a truth to be received and internalised. That's why we need to worship and pray and meet together and soak ourselves in Scripture, because we get so many hours a week *earning* what we have – we need the balance of *grace*, of simply being children receiving the love of their heavenly Father: love which dwells in us, and also wells up in us, overflowing in the rest of our lives.

If we do that, the text promises, we will be filled to the measure of all the fulness of God. This is God's big plan for us: to dwell in our hearts, and to fill us with his love. Or as Dallas Willard says: 'Discipleship is learning to live in heaven before you die.' We experience in part now what this fulness will be in eternity – a vast river of abundant life and transforming love flowing through us.

Finally, Paul prays for power to witness the immeasurably great work of God come to pass in ourselves and in the Church – **this work is not only more than we can ask for, it is more than we can imagine.** And it results in glory, not just to Jesus, but also to the church. In the end, our purpose as individuals and as a community is to live for the glory of God. If Christ dwells in us, and we grasp the fulness of his love, then God's glory is revealed. No wonder Paul finishes with a big Amen – or in modern language: YESSSS! Amen is not a quiet word, by the way, it's an enthusiastic one: let it be so! Bring it on! Yes!

As I close, at ground level, we can't see very far. But when we climb a hill or go to the top floor of a building, we can suddenly see a long way, we get a totally new vision. This is what is happening in this prayer – lifting our eyes from ground level to the big realities of life. This is the greatness and the beauty of this prayer: it defines ultimate reality but earths it in simple truths: faith, love, presence, power. It is the everyday prayer of eternity – and it resets our imaginations, renews our vision and becomes the lens through which we can pray about everything else. May God grant us grace to trust the glorious riches of the Father, that we might pray according to his will, more and more, and to his power at work within us. And to him be glory, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen!